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RWANDA AND FRANCE

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Although officially neutral in the Rwandan civil war, France has been widely perceived as a supporter of the Hutu-led government. While Belgium was the former colonial power, France and Rwanda have a longstanding relationship. After the civil war started in 1990, France deployed several hundred troops to Rwanda, ostensibly to help evacuate foreigners and protect the remaining expatriate community. However, their presence served to bolster President Habyarimana and government forces. In addition, the French provided training and technical advice to government forces, and the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has asserted that French troops actually engaged in combat with the RPF alongside government forces. Human rights sources say the French also helped finance arms purchases by the Rwandan government.

The August 1993 Arusha peace accord requires all foreign forces to depart Rwanda, and the RPF made clear that this provision was directed at the French. In December 1993, when UN peacekeepers arrived, the French troops (numbering 300 at that time) departed. French troops returned to Rwanda briefly in April to help evacuate their nationals and other expatriates, but left as soon as the operation was completed.

As the killings in Rwanda intensified through April and into May, the UN Security Council on May 17 voted to expand UNAMIR, the UN peacekeeping force, from 450 to 5,500 troops, with a new mandate to help protect threatened civilian populations and facilitate relief efforts. However, efforts to finalize a plan of operation, identify troop contributors, and arrange for logistical and equipment needs have delayed deployment of this expanded force.

With the killings continuing in Rwanda, the French government came under increasing pressure to do something. In mid-June, the French proposed a military intervention to protect civilian populations until the expanded UNAMIR forces arrive. The French plan a multi-national force and want UN Security Council blessing for the intervention. So far, only Senegal seems committed to contributing troops to this effort, although the French report that other countries have expressed an interest in joining the effort. We have informed the French and others that we will support this effort since it offers the fastest available option for bringing real protection to threatened civilian populations; however, we want the force to be multinational and have the UN's stamp of approval.

Not surprisingly, the RPF objected to this proposal and said they will engage French troops if they intervene. We have urged the French to make clear to the RPF that the sole purpose of this force would be to protect civilians, not to intervene between the interim government and RPF forces or to in any way bolster the interim government. We have explained this to the RPF directly, but they remain skeptical of French motives.